Attunement to landscape: Dis/Composure of self

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I’d like to begin with a few words by Rainer Maria Rilke. They speak to me, to several years of teaching and traveling in Colombia, Japan, India, and Turkey—as illustrated by these images—and to my life before returning from Cairo to Calgary to begin doctoral studies in educational research. It is these years which ground my understanding of the relationship between self and place, between landscape and in-scape—the place in-between.

_I would describe myself_

_likelandscape I’ve studied_

_at length, in detail;

_like a word I’m coming to understand._

—Rilke, I, 13 – p. 60

However out of fashion romanticism and nostalgia may be, I cannot write about places without occasionally sinking into their seductive embrace. As I follow the labyrinthine diversity of personal geography, lived experience grounded in nature, culture and history, formed of landscape and place, I imagine curricular possibilities as well as listen for the pedagogical wake-up calls.

Lawrence Durrell (1969) writes that the discernible characteristics of a Peru, an India, a Colombia will always express themselves through the human being just as they do through wild flowers. As you get to know any country, tasting the tea, the bread, you begin to realize the important determinant of any culture is the spirit of place (156). We are expressions of our landscape. To know the invisible constant in a place, you need not look for the discernible characteristics but rather, you need to stop looking and be attentive. If you just close your eyes and breathe softly; you will hear the whispered message, for all landscapes ask the same question in the same whisper: ‘I am watching you—are you watching yourself in me?’
If you sit on the top of the Mena House pyramid at sunset and be quiet (amidst the backdrop of the noise of the donkey-boys, and the litter of other travelers, Kodak boxes and Pepsi cans), if you sit quite still in that landscape-diviner’s pose, the whole rhythm of ancient Egypt rises up from the damp cold sand. You can hear its breathing. Nothing is strange to you at such moments—the old temples with their death-cults, the hieroglyphs, the long, slow whirl of the brown Nile among the palm-fringed islets, the crocodiles and snakes. It’s likely just as palpable as it was when the High Priest of Ammon initiated Alexander into the Mysteries. Indeed the Mysteries themselves are still there for those who might seek initiation. (Durrell, 1969, 158-9). Attunement with place through quiet, inner identification will provide you with a notion of the Egyptian landscape with which you could not be awarded in many years of studying ancient Egyptian texts. But having received it, you can at once receive more; the opening is there, so to speak, for you to enter. The secret is attunement.

Taken in this way, travel becomes a sensory, intuitive experience—nourishment in which to root and create. Everyone finds her own “correspondences” in this way—landscapes which provide ideas, and others where half your mind falls asleep and the thought of pen and paper brings you to objection.

Travel returns us to an education of the sensibilities where one realizes that the factor of variation begins inevitably with the landscape and not necessarily the people. These ideas might seem at variance to some whose notions of education and culture are built upon a notion of mentation, filling one’s head with information and pragmatic data—in isolation of a place or its topography—its topos. Of course, there are places where you feel that the inhabitants are not really embodying their landscape; whose
peoples or nations sometimes appear alienated and living at right angles to the land, giving the traveller a sense of perplexity. To say that people are not identified with the land implies missing the mysterious influences which the landscape communicates through the personality.

The traveller, too, has her own limitations; local plumbing or cuisine has caused many to become unsettled. This cannot be avoided. The important thing is to travel with the (ears of the) spirit wide open, and not with too much factual information—to tune in with reverence, and inward attention. Travelling, being-in-this-place, is to be had for the feeling, that mysterious sense of rapport, of being grounded.

How might our curricular and pedagogic work unfold if we opened ourselves to the mystery of any particular topography of study? To the ethos or eros of place? The notion of mystery entails that we are connected to and dependent upon that which falls outside of the sphere of knowing—a sphere which contains implicate patterns and relationships which have their own integrity and are not of our own making (Jardine, 1998; 119). On the basis of such a notion, we must act on the basis of innocence. Our actions must become careful and attentive to what breathes beyond the boundaries that our knowledge has set. We must act in ways that let us act again—to maintain the opening so as to sustain the possibility of acting anew, of acting differently (Berry as cited in Jardine, 1998: 119).

The ability to attend to ourselves, to our students, to our collective lives
depends on a form of “stopping”—of taking that “landscape-diviner’s pose” so to speak, where a space unfolds in which a “calling” or provocation may be heard, where, indeed, “the ocean always calls” (Leggo, 2003). As David Smith (1999) writes:

\textit{meditative stopping makes possible a new kind of stillness in which can be heard or recognized, maybe for the first time, all of those voices, intuitions, dreams and aspirations which have been suppressed under the dispensations of the dominant order. (86).}

Through such attunement we open ourselves to the relatedness of all beings and the potentialities of such composition and belonging. Cultivating such space is intended for one to become present in such a way that one “falls into the gap”—a spaciousness, place in-between, a deepening of consciousness, reaching into the vastness of a temporality which “precedes itself” (Levin. 1989: 266). Heidegger refers to this being-in-time (Zeitlichkeit) as a belonging to the whole of time; where Merleau Ponty says, “a past and a future spring forth, when I reach out to them” (1962: 69), where one, indeed, may be initiated into the Mysteries of the ancients. The inner discipline of meditative stopping assists in making the dimensional shift from the time in which we typically live (past and future oriented) to a state of now-ness (present moment awareness) where one’s mentations are not governed (but in-formed) by past or future events, where if time is conceived as flow or movement then “place is pause” (Tuan, 1977: 198). Here, we entrain to a rhythm beyond the predictable where our objective (true) selves rather than our subjective selves (personas) unfold. In such attunement we are enabled to “return” to ourselves, to be true to ourselves, to the “belonging-together of things that go on without us, without our doing” (Jardine, 87). Thus, we know ourselves in terms of our “relations rather than substance” so that “personal identity appears as emergent and contingent, defining and defined by interactions” with the surrounding space (Macy, 1991).

Mindfulness, Varela (1997) suggests, can “cut the chain” of habitual thought patterns and preconceptions such that we can be open to possibilities other than those contained in our current representations of the life space (27). Cultivating attunement is both a pedagogy and curriculum for non-action that is action—the action of being awake to, or attending to what carries, upholds, or sustains us as human beings. As Smith (1999) offers:

\textit{the stillness of one who is awake does not arise out of passivity, quietism, or simple resignation but rather from deep attunement to the coherence and integrity of everything that is already and everywhere at work in the}
world as it is. (20)

In this way, we come to “take into care beings as a whole” (Heidegger as cited in Levin, 1989; 269). We learn to speak and listen to life so that “the life [can] become more itself,” have more integrity with itself (Hillman, 1992; 75).

Approaching the world meditatively is a living form of ethos whereby one comes to understand that everything is imbued with the energy of everything else. It, then, becomes inconceivable that for the benefit of my own “fictional identity,” I would deliberately impose agendas with students or in research. The spirit of place beckons and extends to the world without end—if the call is heard. In this way, the topography—the curricular and pedagogical activity in which we locate ourselves—requires a responsibility that arises from the students, the study, my self, the time and place in which we met.

Entering the topography with attentiveness is entering expansiveness, resonating regionally throughout the unknown as well as the known. And, one has no choice but to address what is in place, or at place: that is, what is at stake there (Casey, 1998; 338). Place presents itself in its stubborn particularity. Regarding the particular place one is already in, one has to cope with the exacting demands of being just there, with all its finite historicity. As teachers and researchers, we need to be willing to listen to the complexities of place, for place provokes, evokes. It is the event of envelopment itself.

Resources


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